

Alert

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union Retained Members www.fbu.org.uk

Winter 2006/07

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**How FBU members
could not be divided**



Editorial

Welcome to the new look Alerter and welcome from me, your (not now so) new Executive Council member. Recent months have been exceptionally busy and in many respects, highly successful for the Union, the National Retained Committee, retained reps and members across the country.

Thanks to the efforts of the FBU and its parliamentary group, by the end of the year a new law should have been introduced that will make it an offence to obstruct or hinder emergency workers such as firefighters.

The Union also achieved cross party support for a parliamentary motion to get sprinkler systems fitted into all schools.

Furthermore, a scathing report for a cross-party House of Commons Select Committee published in July confirmed much of the criticisms that the FBU have been making of the Government's disastrous plans to regionalise emergency controls.

All of these successes follow sustained campaigning by the union. But no campaign has been as persistent as the Union's efforts to win equal pension and sick pay rights for retained members.

This reached a crucial stage with the landmark decision in March by the House of Lords that paves the way for firefighters working RDS to have access to the current Firefighters Pension Scheme. The decision – hailed by legal experts as one of the most important decisions this year – also opens the door to better sick pay and access to a host of other rights based on the principles of equal treatment with wholetime firefighters. This will apply to all retained fire-fighters represented by the FBU.

Sadly, at a local level local disputes have proliferated in recent months as fire and rescue authorities seek cuts to fire cover and frontline firefighter jobs. The good news is that members working the retained duty system (RDS) have played their full part in the fight back and their interests have been well represented in these campaigns.

Take for example, Hertfordshire fire and rescue service. For many years much of its workforce were not members of the FBU. But as the campaign against the cuts was building, the FBU Hertfordshire brigade committee found that they were receiving increasing numbers of requests for application forms from across all sections of the brigade. Significantly, many came from RDS stations – as many as 50. They were joining the FBU because it was the only union that was actively

fighting to protect and secure jobs for RDS firefighters.

Many who had been in other organisations were greatly angered by advice to co-operate with management to provide cover in their communities, when in fact other members of the same organisation were being advised the opposite! The mixed messages this sent led to a feeling of confusion in the direction. Instead, the FBU message and campaign had a clear strategy with clearly defined objectives.

During the campaign against cuts in Hertfordshire, the financial and moral support from FBU members in other brigades, FBU committees and regions, was tremendous. At one meeting at Hertford Fire Station, many of the retained branches came to speak to us to express their surprise at this and the huge gratitude for this support.

The conclusion of the strike and the subsequent settlement were far from what the FBU in Hertfordshire had set out to achieve. However, in some areas they had been far more successful than they had expected to be. The preservation of all the whole time jobs had been very unexpected. This, however, did little to temper the disappointment that was felt with the enforced closures of Radlett and Bovingdon fire stations.

There appears to be no shortage of chief fire officers and councillors who are willing to risk the safety of firefighters and local communities in order to achieve short-term financial savings, or pursue, as we have seen in Merseyside, personal anti-union agendas.

But efforts by senior management in brigades such as Hertfordshire to divide (wholetime and retained members) and rule have failed time and again. We must make sure that this continues to be the case. Unity is strength.

Tam Mitchell, Executive Council member, Retained



You and the FBU

The FBU is the only vehicle to achieve positive change in the UK Fire and Rescue Service

The FBU is one of the most democratic membership-led unions to be found in the TUC. At the core of our structure is the notion that members, working as a collective, can influence, introduce and change our policies and direction. For members who work the retained duty system (RDS) this allows two clear opportunities to have a direct impact on the direction of the Union. Namely:

- By meeting regularly at the fire station, or branch, and putting forward views and decisions through your elected rep directly into the Brigade Committee. And/or;
- Through the FBU National Retained Committee.
- The National Retained Committee is organised to ensure that issues specific to firefighters who work

RDS firefighters training



the RDS are raised and resolved at a national level within the UK Fire & Rescue Service. The Committee ensures that the views and concerns of the Retained are considered within all FBU decisions.

Like every structure within the FBU however the NRC can only continue to be successful if Members participate and involve themselves within it. As *Alerter* was going to press, the NRC were about to hold their 2006 Annual General Meeting.

At this meeting decisions were to be made which will lay out the key issues for retained firefighters in the next year and how we expect to raise them and resolve them at a national level. Its importance, especially at this key time in the history of the UK Fire & Rescue Service, cannot be underestimated.

Coming from the South West region, I understand the effect that "modernisation" is having on the Retained Service. This centrally driven agenda is based on change for change sake and has resulted in finances being stripped from the front line service in order to feed "here today gone tomorrow" initiatives. The effect has been:

- Retained stations being threatened with closure,
- Cut backs on recruitment leaving station levels low and placing a

burden on Firefighters to increase availability to intolerable levels,

■ New "duty systems" and methods of mobilisation being introduced without proper regard to welfare, availability or workloads,

■ A drop in training provision to an all time low.

Fighting against such plans at a local level – and winning for members at a national level whether it be our campaigns on regional controls, pensions, or attacks against firefighters – is only possible with the involvement and active support of FBU members across the whole of the fire service. Every FBU member in the RDS has the opportunity to influence and shape their future through the FBU. It can be by attending a meeting when its called, becoming a rep or organiser at a local level, or even just making contact with your local or regional FBU rep. The contact details are on the FBU website, available locally and at the back page of *Alerter*.

The future of the Fire and Rescue Service is in our own hands and the only vehicle to achieve positive change is the Fire Brigades Union.

**Tam McFarlane, Region 13
Executive Council member**

→ For more info: www.fbu.org.uk/aboutus/sections/retained/

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It's time to stand up against the accountants, says Baschurch retained rep Andrew Davies



It has never been easier to boost your IT skills – see page 5

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CAMPAIGN NEWS

In short

◆ FBU reps from Staffordshire's 13 retained duty system stations rejected the chief fire officer's proposed salary system at a recent meeting. Reps reported that members expected loss of earnings since the current bandings under the scheme do not reflect current workloads or earnings. They also discussed the dispute in the brigade over plans to remove three retained appliances from two-pump retained stations at Cheadle, Uttoxeter and Wombourne and plans to further reduce wholetime resources.

◆ Affordable housing is becoming an added obstacle to recruiting firefighters working the retained duty system in some brigades and may force closures of retained stations. RDS firefighters need to live near to the stations they serve, but many towns are seeing prices soar thanks to purchases by second-home owners and a lack of affordable rented accommodation. Devon Fire and Rescue Service, for example, has raised concerns that it has been difficult to recruit retained firefighters in areas such as Moretonhampstead, Chagford and parts of South Devon because of spiralling house prices.



A firefighter tackles a forest fire in southern France earlier this year

◆ A firefighter is a firefighter is a firefighter. That's true whether here or abroad, found Ray Price, FBU region 7 rep who recently visited Bagnols en Forets fire station in the Var region in the south of France. Attending over 76,000 callouts a year, the local RDS firefighters provide cover in much the same way as we do in the UK and like us are paid by the calls they receive. But whereas we should be relieved after a period of four hours, they can remain at a fireground for up to three days ... More in a future issue of *Alerter*.

Cleveland fire authority were proposing cuts to fire cover in an area with a number of high risk industrial installations such as this nuclear power station



GEOFF CRAWFORD/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

EMPICS/AP PHOTO/CLAUDE PARIS

Cleveland members help stop cuts

CUTS FIGHTBACK

Retained FBU members played an important part in a recent campaign against cuts proposed by Cleveland local fire authority. The campaign was successful in maintaining fire cover at a retained station on the Headland at Hartlepool. Under the authority's original IRMP, emergency response was to end and the station was to become a community fire station and the retained firefighters "turned into smoke alarm fitters", says Steve Watson, brigade secretary, Cleveland. "Our retained members initiated and played an active part in the campaign to maintain the station at its current status and should be proud

of the outcome. Out of the 6 original proposals contained within the integrated risk management plan (IRMP) for change to fire cover in Cleveland, 4 were withdrawn and 2 were significantly amended. Of course we will need to remain vigilant in the future but once again FBU members have demonstrated that unity is strength."

The agreement that came out of negotiations with management and subsequent consultation with Cleveland members following their 3:1 vote in favour of strike action included a commitment that five firefighters will now crew the first fire appliance attending life-threatening emergencies from all fire stations in the county.

LIFELONG LEARNING

RDS members in skills boost

The Union's lifelong learning project has scored another success for RDS members. After securing funding through a local learning skills council, the FBU in partnership with East & West Sussex fire brigades and a local college, has purchased a mobile learning vehicle. It carries 10 laptops and an interactive whiteboard allows learning to be delivered to firefighters working the retained duty system. RDS, along with wholetime, members also stand to gain from 10% off Open University courses for members of trade unions affiliated to the TUC, a discount secured through the Union's work with Unionlearn, the TUC's learning and skills project. Since the launch of the FBU's Union Learning Fund over 2 years ago, around 1000 members across all regions of the UK have been helped to source learning opportunities in ICT, presentation skills, languages including Spanish and Portuguese and digital photography. In many cases these have been fully supported by management allowing the courses to take place using the brigade's resources and facilitating access for college tutors. More info: <http://ulf.fbu.org.uk/>

Lancs members lobby fire authority

CUTS FIGHTBACK

Retained FBU members and their wholetime colleagues are battling to stop cuts to the fire service in Lancashire. As part of its integrated risk management plan (IRMP) the fire authority has said it wants to remove up to nine appliances across the county, risking the lives and safety of firefighters and the public. Six East Lancashire retained crews are among those facing the chop. Fire chiefs have claimed their services were no longer needed after studies showed that their incidents could be dealt with by neighbouring fire appliances. FBU members in the county beg to differ and at Haslingdon fire station alone firefighters working the RDS have

collected more than 4,000 signatures against the plans. They were to present them to the chair of the fire authority, county councillor Bob Wilkinson, in early October.

FBU member Andy Coulton, a crew manager at Haslingdon (earmarked for closure) and Padiham (facing the loss of one of its two pumps), says: "I'm concerned about the safety of the people of Lancashire and particularly the community in Haslingdon who if this proposal goes ahead, will have to wait for a fire appliance from Rawtenstall with the inevitable delays. It is ironic that the Service is attempting to justify the loss of the fire appliances by claiming the people of Lancashire will be safer due to the community fire safety we have undertaken. As all firefighters know, despite our efforts in CFS, fires still occur and people need rescuing from house fires. Also, at stake at the two stations I work at, is the waste of many years of experience with the loss of 18 firefighters that work the RDS."

Steve Harman, FBU brigade secretary for Lancashire adds: "Yet again this year's IRMP in Lancashire has recommended more cuts to the frontline fire service, proposing the removal of up to nine appliances across the County. We believe that the loss of any appliances increases the risk to firefighters and the public".



ANDY GOULD

Devon Brigade Chair

Salary schemes

In the first half of 2005 a new salary scheme for retained personnel was piloted in Devon Fire and Rescue Service. Following this, the FBU met with management to negotiate a permanent duty system. It was obvious from the outset that it was going to be very difficult to reach agreement. Certain aspects of the management proposals were, in our opinion, outside of Grey Book conditions of service. Following a ruling from the Resolution Advisory Panel (both sides rejected their findings) no agreement was reached.

Management then decided to consult and to some extent to negotiate with individual stations. After the 'hard sell', several stations voted on whether to accept the new duty system. The voting was very close on some stations. The odd vote carried the day. This led to growing concerns that individuals who did not wish to change to the new scheme were doing so under pressure. We were assured that this would not happen.

Our worries grew when one member was put on the new scheme even though he had refused to sign the new contract. It was impossible for him to remain on the old duty system as the attendance book had been removed from his station.

Nine stations were chosen to be the first to move over to the salary scheme in what was the first phase of the 'roll out'. Since then, one of those stations has decided to pull out, while it has been postponed on another due to 'external factors', even though the majority of personnel had signed the new contracts! We have now been informed by DFRS that the 'roll-out' is being slowed down due to the financial implications.

The FBU position has always been that we are more than willing to discuss and negotiate a new salary scheme for those working the RDS, but will not agree to a duty system that is not minimum grey book conditions and acceptable to our members.

Briefing

Herts United

The fire authority tried and failed to drive a wedge between retained and wholetime

It was very much a first for the watch manager of Watford Fire Station to be having a heated exchange with the deputy chief fire officer of his county. Not least because the argument took place outside the control unit at one of Europe's largest ever fires.

Derek MacLeod, who is also an FBU official, had been questioned by his superior, Mark Yates, for publicising the fact that 23 of some of the first firefighters to get to the Buncefield oil depot blaze were due to be issued their redundancy cards. "I was pretty disgusted that the fire service were trying to stop me saving the jobs of these retained firefighters who, at the same time, were being praised to the rafters for their part in putting Buncefield out."

MacLeod had appeared on a television news programme in a bid to raise awareness of the impending redundancies and the swingeing cuts being planned for Hertfordshire Fire Service. "Those 23 retained

firefighters spent as much time at Buncefield as anyone else – and I knew their redundancy letters were being prepared as I stood, four days into Buncefield. I had a big problem with all the praise whilst knowing these guys were apparently surplus to requirements". This was the first of many confrontations as firefighters and their union attempted to stop the huge cuts planned by Hertfordshire Fire Authority.

The chief fire officer, Roy Wilsher, led the line on an integrated risk management plan (IRMP) that aimed to harness computer data on fire prevention with impenetrable jargon – all based around a case which lacked hard and fast evidence of any kind. It was a smokescreen of plausibility that was designed

Senior officers assumed that with two retained stations closing – the wholetime would not fight for the retained

to shave £500,000 of the Herts Fire Service budget with little regard for the safety of the county's citizens.

The fire authority planning had been meticulous, not least in the assumptions made by senior fire service officers that with two retained stations targeted for closure "the wholetime would not fight for the retained."

Senior officers also felt that firefighters would have no stomach for any kind of fight in any case. As MacLeod says: "We'd just come out of the national dispute and Wilsher thought there was no fight left in anyone. The message the fire authority was getting from senior officers was that there was still no problem. There was a constant denial of the depth of feeling amongst the service. The fire authority thought we wouldn't vote to strike and if we did we wouldn't actually go through with it." How wrong they were.

The FBU started by asking all ranks – firefighters and officers – two questions. Firstly, do you think this plan will make Hertfordshire safer? And secondly, if not – will you take strike action over it? 98 per cent of respondents, with a 90 per cent response, said they didn't think it would make Herts safer. And then 93 per cent said they'd be prepared to

ANDREW WARD



strike. "All ranks said this plan was mad" said MacLeod. "The overwhelming majority said we don't think this is safe and we're prepared to do something about it".

The cuts would close the retained stations of Bovingdon and Radlett – the first closures in Herts in 100 years - and dramatically reduce the cover at Watford and Royston. Firefighter posts would also be lost at Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and St Albans. The plan was not only to cut back on the retained but reduce night cover in key stations.

The FBU balloted and 85 per cent voted to take strike action. Immediately the fire authority moved to split the wholetime from the retained. Says MacLeod: "They made an early assumption that an appeasement was to save the wholetime jobs. They thought if we keep the wholetime firefighters in Watford then there won't be any problem."

Twelve firefighters were due to be moved from Watford to other fire stations with the fire cover at night reduced. One engine wouldn't be crewed. The fire authority were real-locating the wholetime away from front-line firefighting to prevention work. The FBU pointed out this was dangerous. The chief kept talking about computer predictions.

The FBU dug in. "There was stalemate as fire crews rejected the move," says MacLeod. "They still couldn't believe the wholetime would fight for the

During the dispute over 50 firefighters moved from the RFU to the FBU

retained. Every time we went back to the table they wouldn't move. We held firm for three or four meetings." All the time either solid strike action was taking place or was planned in a brigade where there had never been industrial action before outside of national disputes.

"But they just wouldn't budge on closing Radlett and Bovingdon" says MacLeod. "In the end we reached a compromise – saved cover in Watford and Royston and stopped cuts to Stevenage fire station". The 23 firefighters working retained duty in Radlett and Bovingdon were offered redeployment. The fire authority also agreed to bring wholetime and RDS posts up to full establishment and made commitments to achieving five firefighters on frontline RDS and wholetime pumps in the future – significant commitments given the years of understaffing that had become the norm.

Radlett and Bovingdon were closed. Radlett was closed suddenly on October 23, just as a survival plan –involving the Radlett community raising additional funds to keep the station open – was near completion. No public statement has been made with local councillors and the public given no notice of the decision.

During the dispute the vast majority of Hertfordshire's RDS firefighters joined the strike and over 50 firefighters moved their allegiance from the RFU to the FBU. Tony Smith, now vice chair of Herts FBU, was an ex-FOA secretary. He realised that a non-striking union was useless in such dire circumstances.

But he hasn't given up yet: "Herts fire crews were forced to take strike action to protect this vital public service in the long term and we have partially succeeded in that aim. The closures of Radlett and Bovingdon will stretch crews from other stations to fill the gap. As far as Radlett is concerned, we would urge people to contact county councillors across Hertfordshire and demand the station remains operational until the survival plan can at least be looked at."

The fire authority's computers are producing statistics that say things are ok. 90 per cent of calls are responded to in 10 minutes. But 10 per cent is a huge amount that don't. Says Derek MacLeod: "There are pockets of our county that have been deprived of adequate fire cover. Fire chief Wilsher says in his 'professional opinion' everything is covered. But the opinion of the professionals who actually deliver our service, it isn't."

During the dispute the fire authority removed the pumps at Bovingdon and Radlett. Detailed timings during non-strike periods showed the response times in Bovingdon and Radlett were not being met, one response took over 40 minutes, hardly any were within 10 minutes.





BASCHURCH FIRE STATION

Deep in North Shropshire lies the small village of Baschurch, located about nine miles from the famous market town of Shrewsbury

The village is typical – it has a small shop, three pubs a hardware store, a hair salon and a chip shop. Most people who live in the area commute to work so as with most retained fire stations, we often struggle to maintain our crewing during day times in the week.

Our motley crew is made up of a wide mix of expertise ranging from ground workers and builders to engineers, lorry drivers, mechanics, trainers, jack of all trades and not forgetting a water engineer who knows his stuff (that's me!). We have one full time colleague too.

Until recently we were a mixed bag at the station from the Union point of view. It was not until we had a visit from our local FBU rep

**Now is the time to
make a stand in unity
to stop the accountants
ruining the Service**

that we realised that the union that many firefighters were paying into was not doing their stuff! The FBU, instead, were fighting to get retained members the right to a pension, better working conditions and equality of status in all areas that they are treated less favourably by brigades.

Here in Shropshire we are lucky as we have an chief fire officer who understands the retained duty system and along with our good FBU officials and branches, things are looking pretty good. We cannot afford to take our fingers off the pulse, however.

We are constantly reminded that,

as events in Hertfordshire, have shown us, the pound is mightier than the hose! Fire authorities and their attempts to cut costs have demonstrated that lives will be put at risk to save a quid or two.

Retained stations are being seen as an easy target because we are often perceived as standing alone and willing to take everything thrown at us on the chin. Now is the time to make a stand in unity to stop the accountants that run the brigades from ruining a system that has took years to build and when funded and managed properly functions well.

We regularly read about the brave men in the armed forces who are sent overseas to put their lives at risk. The Territorial Army enjoy the backing from the government to have time off from their full time work to carry out their duties. Yet as retained firefighters, we potentially risk our lives daily with little or no support at all. Let us look for recruitment and improvement not closures of small stations as a part of the future. Government should be providing incentives and encouragement for employers to release us from the work place to attend fire calls without risk of losing our jobs for unauthorised time off.

We all have a part to play whether as an active member or showing our support by listening and suggesting improvements to our local FBU representatives. My advice to anyone thinking about joining Fire Brigades Union or not is: the more of us there are, the louder our voice will be shout. Together we will win.

**Andrew Davies
Branch Rep
Baschurch**

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